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DEPARTMENT FOR A/C FOR LISA KORTE

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TAGS: PGOV PREL GB  
SUBJECT: GABON: NATIONAL PARKS FACING SIGNIFICANT  
CHALLENGES; NEW PARKS DIRECTOR OPTIMISTIC ABOUT THE FUTURE

REF: 09 LIBREVILLE 00481

Classified By: Ambassador Eunice Reddick for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Gabon's newly-appointed director of the National Parks Agency (ANPN), biologist and environmentalist Dr. Lee White, reviewed the current status of the parks authority, anticipated next steps to develop eco-tourism and the parks, and provided a general background on the status of ANPN to the Embassy. White noted that ANPN is officially attached to the Ministry of Forests, but due to a strong personal interest from President Ali Bongo, the agency now unofficially answers to the Presidency. He was upbeat on the prospects for improving the management and protection of the 13 national parks in Gabon (10 percent of Gabon's territory) even though underfunding, poor administration, and mismanagement of the parks has left them unprotected and, in some cases, facing financial disaster. Noted American environmentalist, Michael Fay, is joining ANPN as a technical director. End Summary.

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ANPN Under New Management  
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¶2. (SBU) Dr. Lee White, newly appointed director of the National Parks Agency (ANPN) and former Gabon country director of the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), met with the Ambassador and emboffs on November 5. He noted that Gabon's new President, Ali Bongo, has been committed to the national park system in Gabon since its creation by President Omar Bongo in 2002 and is very interested in revitalizing the development of Gabon's 13 national parks. Along with numerous other changes Ali Bongo has made in the way Gabon's government operates (reftel), he created more direct oversight from the Presidency in order to reverse the neglect of the park system, and placed White as the director of ANPN and as an advisor to the Presidency. White said he did not believe that his appointment at ANPN contradicted the 2007 National Parks law regarding the status of ANPN, which he helped draft. He said that the President is still considering options for ANPN's placement, but that for now ANPN is technically under the administration of the Ministry of Forests, as per the law. White said that he answers directly to the President, but also to the Minister of Forestry and the Minister of Planning. While there are questions about the legality of the move of ANPN as a de-facto organization under the Presidency, White said that the legal issues would be "worked out" and that direct attention by the President is "definitely a good thing." He also noted that President Bongo is reluctant to make any changes to existing law.

¶3. (SBU) White will answer to the President and receive funding through the Ministry of Forests, but also have to work closely with the Ministries of Budget, Economy and

Planning. White noted that in the past ANPN had difficulty making policy for the parks since it had to work across multiple ministries. While still technically the case, White's new role as an advisor to the President and the President's willingness to take the lead on issues relating to ecotourism and national parks will help streamline the process. No policy statement has been made and White does not anticipate ANPN physically relocating to the Presidential Palace.

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Parks Facing Many Challenges  
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¶4. (SBU) White painted a dismal picture of the current situation. He said there was zero progress made over the last year with the parks system and that the lodge in Loango National Park, one of the few parks developed for tourism with a private sector partner, is on the verge of closing due to differences over payments between the government and the lodge's owner, Dutch eco-entrepreneur Rombout Swanborn. Swanborn recently moved his Africa's Connection planes from Gabon to Sao Tome where he runs the Omali Lodge and the Bom Bom Resort in Principe.

¶5. (SBU) There are a total of 15 conservators/park wardens working across the country to manage the 13 parks ) over 10 percent of Gabon's territory. Each park is supported by 4 ) 12 poorly educated and trained staff working with little or no logistical support. The parks suffer from undeveloped infrastructure, including roads and accommodations. White also noted that the administration of the parks was mishandled over recent years, leaving the parks very poorly managed both at ANPN and on the ground. According to White, this 10 percent of Gabon's territory is secured by a handful of people with little or no budget.

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The Way Forward  
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¶6. (C) White will seek to downsize ANPN's presence in Libreville to place more resources in the field and staff development. Additionally, he will seek to relieve stress between the conservators and international environmental non-governmental organizations (Note: Organizations active in Gabon's park include WCS and World Wildlife Fund (WWF). End note). This process would include formalizing which organizations are working in the parks and what their specific mandates allow. The government will also seek to standardize how concessions to operate businesses in the parks are granted and managed. Emboffs highlighted the recent visit of a U.S. Forest Service team to advise the government on park concessions.

¶7. (C) White announced that environmentalist Michael Fay agreed to join ANPN as the technical director. Fay's mandate is to help modernize the system of conservators and support staff of guides and guards. This would include the development and training of professional park rangers ) possibly attached to the gendarmerie. Fay was instrumental in the creation of Gabon's park system and has substantial expertise in park management, according to White. White noted that the way forward would continue to be based on the "Vision for Gabon" plan developed under the auspices of WCS and private foundation funds.

¶8. (SBU) ANPN is putting together a budget request that is ten times larger than previous years. ANPN will receive funding from at least two different budgets, a "functioning" or operating budget via the Ministry of Forests and a separate "investment" budget. ANPN is interested in improving cooperation with donors, including the United States. Ambassador and emboffs noted ongoing assistance to Gabon and other Congo Basin Forestry Partnership (CBFP) countries from USG through the Central African Regional Program for the Environment (CARPE).

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COMMENT  
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¶9. (C) White paints a realistic and disappointing picture for the current status of Gabon's national parks and there is no doubt that there is a lot of work to be done. Gabon's national parks were established under the late President Omar Bongo with much fanfare, but with no capacity within the Gabon government to develop them. USG agencies assisted with the development of legislation for the parks, and national park management. The USG, EU, Japan and other donors have funded park activities of WWF, WCS and other international NGOs. White's commitment and Ali Bongo's direct interest offer a significant opportunity for the languishing nascent parks system and ecotourism to be revitalized. The issue is a priority and is on the agenda of a government-wide retreat held at Lope National Park November 12-14. (Bio Note: White is a UK citizen, but also holds a Gabonese passport.)

REDDICK